

Washington State to offer weather class for farmers

By Matthew Weaver
Capital Press

The new Washington State University AgWeatherNet school will help farmers set up weather stations in their fields during an online class next month.

The free school will be offered virtually at 7:50 a.m. on Feb. 4.

The school will show stakeholders how the weather network collects and uses data from 200 public stations and about 200 private stations, delivering data to 13,000 registered users and other state residents.

At its peak during the summer and winter, the network web portal has 100,000-plus visitors per day, said Lav Khot, network director.

Many growers have established private weather stations. Khot wants to help them set up and maintain the stations so the data is useful.

In 2020, the network initiated a program to incorporate approved private weather stations into its network of federal stations and AgWeatherNet-maintained stations.

Stations installed by AgWeatherNet maintain particular protocols. Some of the private stations are showing maintenance issues, which affects data quality, Khot said.

“The purpose of this weather school is to let stakeholders gauge whether they really need a private station or a network like ours is sufficient,” he said.

The school was requested by farmers, said Gwen Hoheisel, regional specialist and director of Washington State’s Extension in Benton County.

Many farmers are noticing a difference between commercial weather stations set up in-field compared to out of field, she said.

Public weather stations from AgWeatherNet or NOAA are set up in an open field, not in the middle of an apple orchard or blueberry field, she said.

“If you’re trying to model something that’s happening in your orchard, potato field or crop, having a weather station as close as possible with that real data is really important,” she said. “There’s going to be people that would like more precise information.”

Farmers should leave the school knowing how to purchase and establish an on-farm weather station, Hoheisel said.

The school will include site selection, maintenance and how to collect and use data.

They should also be able to assess data from other public or private sources, Hoheisel said.

Technology has improved over the past decade, Khot said.

Sensors on stations are becoming smaller and more compact, and easier to install and maintain, he said.

Previously, most network data was collected 5 to 6 feet above ground level, adhering to National Weather Service protocols, but as the state transitions to towers as part of building a “mesonet” network, researchers are also collecting wind and air temperature data at about 30 feet above ground level, Khot said, giving a better representation of temperature inversion scenarios specific to a particular site.

“In the next few years, we will have about 100 of these towers collecting professional-plus quality weather data,” he said.

The weather school may become an annual event, Khot said.

“We want to make the weather a little bit more meaningful to the growers,” he said.



A Washington State University AgWeatherNet system monitors conditions in a hop yard.

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